

Soviet Is Losing Rights To Fish Off West Africa

By JAMES BROOKE, Special to the New York Times
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The waters off West Africa -long the Soviet Union's largest overseas source of fish - are increasingly off limits to Soviet fishing boats.

In the last decade, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Morocco and Senegal have stopped allowing Soviet fishing.

This year, Sierra Leone indicated that it would cancel its Soviet fishing accord, and Mauritania renegotiated a tougher fishing pact with the Soviet Union.

"In the last two years there has been a marked move among the Africans back to the West," Gerald S. Posner, an oceanography professor at City College in New York, said in a telephone interview. "They found the Russians exploiting them heavily." Charges of Underpaying

The bans on Soviet fishing grew out of charges in several West African countries that the Russians were underpaying for their catches. These countries, which include some of the poorest in the world, recently discovered that fish can be a valuable, if often hidden, resource.

Adding an East-West twist to this battle over sardines and snappers, the United States joined the fray in 1984 with the African Coastal Security Program.

The program, which costs about \$2.5 million a year, helps the tiny navies of West African countries patrol their 200-mile offshore fishing zones.

The largest official American aid project in some countries, the program has paid or is paying for projects like providing patrol boats for Equatorial Guinea and Sierra Leone; supplying ship-to-shore radios to Guinea-Bissau, the Ivory Coast and Mauritania; dock construction in Gambia and Guinea and the construction of a \$4 million naval base for Senegal. Fear of Fish Depletion

"The biggest concern is that the fish are going to be depleted before they get coastal security," an American diplomat here said.

In Guinea-Bissau, an American-supported fishing patrol program started this year. In the first year, 20 boats were apprehended and \$1 million in fines were levied.

Most of the boats were from European Community countries. No Soviet boats were fined. Indeed, no Soviet boats have fished here legally since a 10-year accord on fishing and related matters with the Soviet Union expired in 1985.

The experience here with Soviet fishing reflects a wider disenchantment with Soviet fishing across West Africa.

In April 1975, seven months after winning independence from Portugal, Guinea-Bissau signed the 10-year accord with the Soviet Union. The Guineans had high hopes - the Russians had been their major arms supplier during a 13-year war for independence.

With few natural resources and a per capita income of \$170, the new nation looked to the sea as a major source of revenue. Indeed, Guinea-Bissau's land mass - 13,948 square miles - is half the size of its offshore fishing zone.

This nation controls a fishing zone estimated to have a potential annual catch of 300,000 tons, a richness second in West Africa only to that of Mauritania.

But the Soviet accord failed to bring much of this offshore wealth onshore.

In 1982 and 1983, the Soviet Union paid a total of \$3.7 million in fishing fees - \$23 million less than they should have, a World Bank report said in 1985.

The Soviet Union routinely underestimated and underpriced their catches, the author of the report, Vlad M. Kaczynski, a professor of marine studies at the University of Washington, said in a telephone interview.

The development end of the fishing accord, a Soviet-Guinean fishing company, fared little better. At the end of 10 years, the company, Estrela do Mar, owned no boats and was \$5 million in debt to the Russians.

"The agreement with the Soviets generated a lot of doubts, a lot of distrust," Suleimane Djassi, a Guinean director of the company, said in an interview. Accord With Europe

The accord with the Russians was renewed in 1985, but the protocols or putting the agreement into effect have not been agreed upon.

In the interim, the Guineans signed an accord with the European Community. Under the accord, Guinea-Bissau expects to receive about \$4 million a year - compared with roughly \$1 million a year from the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union still accounts for the largest national catch on the West Coast of Africa, and the Russians show no signs of giving up on the rich waters of Guinea-Bissau.

At the Soviet Embassy here, Yevgeny Alekseyev, the local correspondent of the Soviet press agency Tass, dismissed criticism of the old Soviet fishing accord as "a lot of noise."

"The Common Market countries take a better kind of fish," he said. "Our boats are farther away from their ports, so it is more expensive to fish."

